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The water torture of baseball's steroid leaks

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The water torture of baseball's steroid leaks
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When I was a young boy I remember using the term "Chinese water torture" for any activity that seemed long, torturous, and pointless. I have been reminded of this repeatedly over the last few years as slowly, usually one by one, the names of those baseball players who tested positive for some sort of performance enhancing drugs have become public. Anonymous and confidential drug testing that was conducted for Major League baseball and the MLB Players Association in 2003 to determine the extent of a drug problem in baseball has turned out to be not so confidential.

Obviously some the anonymity has been taken out of the process by the various leaks from a sealed document of a grand jury. Some law abiding journalists have managed somehow to get this information, have it confirmed, and then publish it in their newspaper or on their newspaper's website, before anyone else beats them to it. Confidentiality be damned. Trust has become an unknown commodity in our tell-all world. This week the names of Manny Ramirez and David Ortiz leaked out a mere six years after the tests.

In Manny's case there can be little surprise given the fact that he has just finished serving a 50 game suspension for failing a more recent test. In David Ortiz's case again there can not be too big a shock when one considers the circumstantial evidence drawn from changes in his career trajectory in the early part of this decade.

Despite all this, six year old news is being treated with the kind of sensation that a recent drug bust at your parish church might garner. Baseball writers have some sort of special gift for defaming the game with old and tired news. They seem to have appointed themselves as the special guardians of the purity of baseball across time, although given their limited vision, they seem to be able to deal with only one set of drugs at a time. Also they can not deal with more than one sport at a time, or perhaps football has been too riddled with steroids from the start for anyone to care.

Baseball writers have also appointed themselves to protect the purity of baseball history by insisting on referring to the past 10-15 years as the Steroid Era. Perhaps it was.

However if the "Steroid Era" becomes a specific designation for record keeping purposes, then shouldn't there also be an "Amphetamine Era" when players used greenies to make it through those difficult road trips, those day games after night games, those first games after coming off coast-to-coast travel without a day off. How many players got up for the game in this way? What sort of factor were amphetamines in Pete Rose's consecutive game hitting streak, or even more significant, how often did Cal Ripken Jr. need them to keep his consecutive game streak alive while chasing after Lou Gehrig's record?

How many starts did a pitcher who logged major innings make with greenies? How many times did a reliever need greenies to prepare for a third day running out of the bull pen?

Was there a "Cocaine Era" that went beyond Pittsburgh? If so what was its impact on performance? Steve Howe seemed to pitch better when high than when sober. How often did players need medication of any kind to be able to perform on any given day?

Do we need answers to these questions? NO!

At least no more than we need to know who tested positive on the 2003 anonymous and confidential test. If we need to know anything, we need to know who is testing positive today. And we do know that, because those who test positive today are in violation of baseball's drug policy and suspended from competition for fifty games and that is public knowledge.

It seems to me that those who tested positive in 2003 have either decided to stop using banned substances or they have been or will be detected in the testing program. How much further anyone needs to go with testing is of course debatable, and no doubt that debate will continue.

What we also need to know is how the names on a sealed list from a grand jury are being leaked. And why? Should we require the newsies to undergo lie detector tests or be given truth serum about their illegal activities? Or are the leaks coming from somewhere else? The violation of the law and the violation of the confidentiality guaranteed in the 2003 drug test are certainly as significant an issue as whose name is on a six year old list. Of course no one is investigating the investigative reporters because they claim constitutional protection, something they choose to ignore when the stream runs in the other direction.

This is a terrible mess and one that apparently is not going away. This Chinese water torture is just too much fun for those who have a vested interest in major league name dropping.

When Donald Fehr retires, the agreement to the drug testing in 2003 and the failure to secure the confidentiality of the results will be one major mark against what has been his remarkable association with the Major League Baseball Players Association.

And when baseball historians look back on this era at the end of the 21st century my guess is that they will wonder why baseball writers seemed to be mesmerized by this form of Chinese water torture. There seems to be more lamentation in the land in the early 21st century than there was during the Great Awakening at the middle of the 18th century.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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